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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ANKARA 000432

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SE, EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/19/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AJ](#) [AM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT FAVORABLE TO
NORMALIZED RELATIONS WITH ARMENIA

REF: A. ANKARA 389

[1](#)B. 08 ANKARA 1597

[1](#)C. 08 ANKARA 2118

[1](#)D. ANKARA 166

[1](#)E. ANKARA 365

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT. Despite the March 17 introduction of the latest Armenian genocide resolution (AGR) in the House of Representatives (H. Res 252), Turkish anxiety about U.S. genocide recognition -- always heightened around April 24 (Armenian Remembrance Day) -- has been less acute than in past years. The upcoming visit of President Obama and optimism that Turkey may be on the cusp of a breakthrough with Armenia has generated considerable confidence that Turkey might dodge a bullet this year and maybe for some years to come. The GOT is not showing its hand on Armenia ahead of critical March 29 local elections, but it has hardly kept secret that a rapprochement with Yerevan is in the making. Turks know this process is real and they support it. The domestic political context is favorable to Ankara making a bold move on Armenia: With the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) likely to come away from March 29 local elections with another solid victory, PM Erdogan's dominance over Turkish politics is complete. The move would also bolster the activist regional foreign policy the GOT has pursued in recent years. Any perception that Turkey has "sold out" Azerbaijan is a serious, but probably not insurmountable risk. The diplomatic and political costs of failing to reach a deal with Armenia could, in fact, be greater for Erdogan than any blowback from a completed deal. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN FULL SUPPORT

[1](#)2. (C) The mainstream press, much of which is otherwise at war with Erdogan, as well as the pro-government, moderately Islamist news outlets have been almost uniformly supportive of the normalization of bilateral relations with Armenia. Since narrowly averting a floor vote on AGR in the House of Representatives in 2007, leading commentators have been arguing that Turkey must put its relations with Armenia in order, applauding Gul's decision to visit Yerevan in September 2008 and subsequent non-governmental initiatives to promote an open dialogue on the Armenian question. Commenting on the perennial efforts of the Armenian Diaspora to pursue genocide recognition in the U.S., Semih Idiz wrote in mainstream "Milliyet" March 16, "It is sad to see the same uneasiness surround both the Turkish and Armenian nations every April; now is the time for the two nations to find a

better way to address this issue." Omer Taspinar, the same day in mainstream "Sabah," wrote, "The timing of the Obama visit should not be a reason for false hopes...We cannot take Washington's favorable treatment of Ankara for granted and assume that President Obama will not agree with the Armenian lobby...The way to counter this process is by paving the way for more dialogue with Armenia...Opening the border before April 24 will be the best thing to do."

OPPOSITION PARTIES NEUTERED

¶3. (C) AKP is expected to trounce its opponents again in March 29 local elections (ref A). While political winds may shift if AKP fares worse than expected, the opposition has so far been unable to use the rapprochement with Armenia against the government. Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal complained September 1, ahead of Gul's visit to Yerevan (ref B), that Turkey was trying to reverse official policy without Armenia meeting any Turkish conditions for the normalization of relations: formal recognition of Turkey's borders, withdrawal from occupied Azerbaijani territory, and suspension of GOAM support for Diaspora efforts to promote genocide recognition internationally, but he failed to gain any traction. CHP tried unsuccessfully to create hysteria over the "I Apologize" campaign launched in December 2009, in which four prominent journalists and intellectuals started an internet petition apologizing for the crimes committed against Ottoman Armenians in 1915 (ref C). CHP Vice Chairman Onur Oymen accused Gul, who had defended the right of Turks to express

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their views freely, of failing to protect the honor of the country. CHP MP Canan Aritman accused Gul of being ethnically Armenian, called the initiative "anti-Turkey," and tried, but failed, to move Parliament to adopt a motion opposing it. CHP has since been trying to cultivate a more social democratic, pro-European identity, and will find it difficult to go on the attack mode if the government normalizes or expresses its intention to normalize relations with Armenia.

¶4. (C) The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) is equally hamstrung. Retired Ambassador and MHP MP Ertugrul Kumcuoglu confided to us that he was surprised the public lined up so squarely behind President Gul when he visited Yerevan. MHP Leader Devlet Bahceli, ahead of the visit, accused Gul of "bowing to foreign pressures and impositions and surrendering to Armenian lobbies, wounding Turkey's honor." But the party's nationalist attacks were easily checked. Its revered former leader Alpaslan Turkes held contacts with then-Armenian President Leven Ter-Petrossian (LTP) in the late 1990s, which nearly led to a breakthrough in bilateral relations. Those past openings to Armenia are well known, allowing AKP to easily rebut MHP attacks. FM Babacan cleverly likened Gul's visit to Turkes's contacts with LTP, raising MHP's ire. Representatives of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), with which AKP competes in the heavily Kurdish Southeast, support freedom of expression on the Armenia issue and normalized relations with Armenia.

PUBLIC ENTHUSIASTIC

¶5. (C) Most importantly, the public has not risen to the bait. While the average Turk cares immeasurably about genocide accusations and would respond negatively to any official recognition of an Armenian genocide by a third country, especially the U.S., normalized bilateral relations with Armenia are a somewhat esoteric subject. We have not seen any recent polling data, but our impression is that most Turks, at least those who read the papers and care an inkling about foreign affairs, support the government's "no problems" foreign policy and believe Turkey should work actively to promote peace and stability in its neighborhood.

The positive response to Turkey's roll-out of its Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) -- which includes Armenia -- at the height of the Georgia-Russia conflict is evidence of broad public support for this activist approach in Turkey's foreign policy. Indeed, Armenia's willingness to engage in the CSCP has put the process of normalizing Turkey-Armenia relations on a steadier footing; the Turks are well aware that the CSCP cannot succeed if the Armenia track fails (and probably conclude that Georgia and Azerbaijan are unlikely to walk away from the CSCP if Turkey continues to attach great importance to it).

16. (C) Armenia rapprochement also offers the chattering classes and those analysts enthusiastic about Turkey's newfound diplomatic muscle the prospects of a tangible, substantive diplomatic success, which has so far eluded Turkey. The failure to achieve an outcome on Armenia, after the wave of enthusiasm triggered by Gul's visit to Yerevan, may actually pose a bigger political risk to Erdogan than success. At the same time, failure would undermine Turkey's capacity to play a facilitating role in Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K) and elsewhere. Normalized relations with Armenia, or at least the clear indication that the two sides are engaged in a process toward that end, might also prove to be one of the few tangible, pro-European "reforms" AKP can muster this year. And the Turks need success stories, not least of all when the European Commission may have to condemn Turkey in a year-end progress report for its failure to open its ports to Cypriot vessels.

RAPPROCHEMENT CONTRIBUTES TO
NORMALIZATION OF TURKISH SOCIETY

17. (C) Meanwhile, Turkey is changing. The above mentioned "I Apologize" campaign received nearly thirty thousand signatures. The chorus of support -- if not for the apology, but for the cathartic effect of a free and open discussion of Turkey's history -- drowned out the recalcitrant voices opposed to the initiative (ref D). The Ankara Prosecutor

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dismissed a Turkish Penal Code Article 301 complaint against the organizers. (NOTE: The complainants appealed the Prosecutor's dismissal and the case was sent back by the Appeals Court to the Prosecutor with instructions to investigate the complaint. The Prosecutor is requesting that the Justice Minister dismiss it finally. END NOTE.) Likewise, a recent controversy stemming from a Ministry of National Education (MoNE) circular instructing primary schools to show a documentary-like film on alleged Armenian crimes perpetrated against Turks prompted an outcry by parents, educators and NGOs, causing MoNE to stop distributing the DVD to schools (ref E). The Armenian question is a major source of Turkish neuralgia; the prospect of rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia has had a catalyzing affect on the ability of Turkish society to discuss the subject openly, as Hrant Dink, among others, predicted it would. Turkish liberals are thus prepared to support Erdogan strongly on bilateral relations if he presses ahead.

AZERBAIJAN FACTOR A RISK,
BUT MAYBE NOT INSURMOUNTABLE

18. (C) Azerbaijan could be the government's Achilles heel. Turks have generally bought into the mythic quality of relations between Turks and Azerbaijanis -- "two states, one nation" -- assuming they are basically Turks, while generally ignoring any cultural and historic dissimilarities. (NOTE: The friendship most Turks feel for Azerbaijan is rare; according to surveys, most Turks claim to dislike nearly every other nation in the world except for Azerbaijan. END NOTE.) Any perception that Turkey has "sold out" its Azerbaijani brethren in negotiating with Armenia could be

very damaging to AKP if exploited effectively by its opponents. It is widely assumed here that Azerbaijan has considerable influence among Turkey's business, media and political elite, both inside and outside the government (much of it paid for), including through Turkey's sizable "Azerbaijani Diaspora."

¶9. (C) But the capacity of Azerbaijani opposition to derail Turkey's rapprochement with Armenia is not absolute, if the GOT is committed. Ilham Aliyev is not as beloved as his father was here and his democratic failings are not as easily overlooked in this more democratic Turkey. Indeed, MFA contacts have lamented to us that Azerbaijan has a democratic deficit vis a vis Armenia, despite Yerevan's own democratic shortcomings. Commenting on Azerbaijan's March 18 referendum, Sami Kohen, in mainstream "Milliyet," wrote, "Azerbaijani President Aliyev is following a path cut by every authoritarian figure in the world. Today's referendum to extend the president's term to a lifetime term is a mistaken approach and there is great political risk for the future of Azerbaijan if the referendum passes." Meanwhile, Erdogan probably has the ability to withstand attacks that he has "sold out" Azerbaijan: His dominance over the AKP is absolute and his nationalist credentials unrivaled post-Davos; the political opposition is marginalized; the military is quiet; MFA is supportive of and working hard to see a deal with Armenia; and the mainstream, non-AKP media is in almost full-throated support for normalizing relations.

¶10. (C) While Ankara would be unlikely to act in a manner that it believed genuinely contrary to Azerbaijani interests or that irreparably harmed Turkey-Azerbaijan relations, the political and economic costs to Turkey of a temporary fracture in relations with Baku should be manageable for Ankara. Turkey's border closure with Armenia in 1993 in response to the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territory has effectively rendered Turkey a non-actor in the process to resolve the N-K conflict -- Azerbaijan's number one domestic and foreign policy priority. Turkey-Azerbaijan energy cooperation is critical for creating a non-Russian route to market for Caspian gas in Europe, and for meeting Turkey's own energy needs. Negotiations with Azerbaijan on delivering new Caspian energy remain stalled, although Turkish officials are optimistic about signing a deal in the near future (septel). GOT officials we have met with recently understand the linkages between energy, opening the border with Armenia, and the stalemated conflict in N-K and are working to package these issues in a way that they believe will prove acceptable to Azerbaijan on all three issues.

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